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### BOOKS: Snap reflex drives daily decisions, good or bad

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*For the Journal-Constitution*

#### NONFICTION REVIEW

Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking. By Malcolm Gladwell. Little, Brown. \$25.95. 277 pages.

The verdict: Without hesitation, a provocative and enlightening read.

We engage in mind reading every day. Whether it's basketball, improvisational theater or military strategy, we rely on our split-second ability to analyze other people's feelings and intentions. In his new book, "Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking," Malcolm Gladwell demonstrates how these quick observations and reactions can be a powerful tool in the course of making decisions, big and small.

Regular readers of The New Yorker will be familiar with Gladwell's provocative essays. Focusing largely on everyday experience, from "Saturday Night Live" skits to ketchup to plagiarism, his pieces often start with a case study of an interesting person or process. He then pursues discussion of a larger, related question, circling around several times before finding an unexpected place to dive into a wholly new perspective that is simultaneously commonsensical and inventive.

Before becoming a staff writer for The New Yorker, Gladwell was a science and business writer at The Washington Post. In 2000, he published his first book-length work, "The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference," a surprise best seller about social change. Using techniques developed in his earlier study of AIDS, Gladwell connects social movements to infectious-disease epidemics.

Master of the extended metaphor, Gladwell is not so much a science writer as a guide through what he calls "an intellectual adventure story."

While "The Tipping Point" concentrates on social phenomena, such as the decline of crime in New York City, "Blink" focuses on human mental processing, or rapid cognition, that can make or break a situation. Having more information, Gladwell explains with his opening example of fraud in the art world, is not necessarily better. Additional data may only add to the confusion, confuse the situation.

At Cook County Hospital in Chicago, for instance, emergency doctors improved their diagnoses of heart attacks when they disregarded much of the data at hand and concentrated instead on four key predictive factors.

In six chapters, Gladwell develops his ideas largely through case studies that reinforce his main points: "Blink" happens very rapidly within "the locked room" of our unconscious; we need to take this ability seriously as it leads to important insights; it can also betray us because quick judgment is highly influenced by the environment and predispositions. Finally, we can learn to strengthen and manage "blink" by paying attention and making corrections.

For Gladwell, the experience of a successful car salesman, and how he manages the potential for bias to influence behavior, is as instructive as that of an art historian, Marine general or marriage therapist who knows when to rely on expert "thin-slicing" rather than mountains of data.

One gets the impression that Gladwell thinks the way he writes -- in ever-narrowing concentric circles. His fifth chapter begins with the story of Kenna, a rock musician, and then covers terrain from Dick Morris (when he was a pollster Clinton) to Coca-Cola's foray into New Coke to Steve Martin to food tasters and beyond. Finally returning to Kenna, we learn that he was highly regarded by other musicians but did not measure up in market research studies. Gladwell turns out, has little use for polling and surveys. He argues that the way we describe our decision-making afterwards is reflective of the way we actually make decisions.

Clearly, the "blink" approach is not infallible. Most of the time, through quick mental processing, we are able to read people's faces, giving us enormous insight into their minds; sometimes we make mistakes. In his chapter on "The Warren Harding Error," Gladwell demonstrates how the American public voted overwhelmingly for someone largely because he "looked presidential."

Gladwell provides an even more chilling example of misjudgment in his final chapter, which recounts the 1999 Amadou Diallo incident in New York, in which a 22-year-old unarmed man from Guinea was shot down by four plainclothes officers. When Diallo reached for his wallet, they assumed he was reaching for a gun. In a split second, the police decided he was dangerous -- but Diallo was simply scared. Due to what Gladwell calls "temporary autism" created by nightfall, biases and adrenaline, the police officers tragically failed to read the situation.

The key to "blink" is to learn how to use it to our best advantage. Gladwell provides clues into that kind of discriminating judgment -- such as deliberately slowing down the process -- but, inevitably, not all the answers. Indeed, the sheer number of fascinating examples cited at times obscures his main ideas. And, of course, not everyone's mind operates as nimbly as Malcolm Gladwell's.

All the same, it is a pleasure to travel through this land of rapid cognition with a guide as curious and insightful as Gladwell -- even if the journey requires a bit more concentration than just the blink of an eye.

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Photo: mug of Malcolm Gladwell

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